

## **Overcoming Barriers; Enabling Learners**

### **Planning, designing and delivering the full-time FE curriculum in Scotland's Colleges**

A REPORT BY HM INSPECTORS OF EDUCATION FOR THE SCOTTISH  
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# 1 Introduction

The further education (FE) curriculum in Scotland's colleges aims to enable people to develop skills and capacities which will improve the quality of their working, personal, family and community life. To achieve this aim people need assistance to overcome barriers constraining their confidence and ability to take part in learning situations and equip them with new skills that enable them to progress to employment or further learning.

The Lifelong Learning Strategy for Scotland, *Life Through Learning, Learning Through Life* (Scottish Executive, February 2003) highlighted the need for education providers to deliver responsive, relevant services to learners which enable them to make transitions to further learning or employment. The report by HMIE for SFEFC, *Student Learning in Scottish Further Education Colleges* (February 2004) built on this focus by exploring the learning and teaching implications arising from the Scottish Executive's successful drive towards widening access and engagement of learners who previously may have been excluded from learning after the compulsory stages. It also examined some issues concerning retention and achievement.

Currently around 70,000 learners<sup>1</sup> undertake full-time programmes in Scotland's colleges. These programmes consist of a minimum of 21 hours of study per week, generally spread over three to four days. This enables learners in part-time and flexible modes of employment, or with other commitments, to undertake full-time programmes.

The present report seeks to identify effective curricular approaches and developments in full-time FE provision. It draws on evidence from the last five years of reviews of colleges by HMIE and recent fieldwork carried out in six colleges. The text of this report makes clear whether references are made to this group of six colleges, or apply more generally across the sector.

Learners undertake FE programmes for a wide range of reasons. For most it offers a second chance or new opportunity to gain a formal qualification which will help them to access employment, promotion or further studies. For a considerable number of older learners the learning and teaching environment in colleges is significantly different from their last encounter with formal learning. Many learners had a negative experience of previous formal learning situations and as a result are under-confident about their skills and abilities. It is therefore important that the learning process does not reinforce previous negative experiences and removes as many barriers as possible.

Learner goals range across:

- gaining qualifications for entry to higher education or the workplace (including career change);
- gaining qualifications to accredit existing skills;
- enhancing and updating skills to progress in employment; and
- seeking personal development and enrichment.

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<sup>1</sup> Scottish Funding Council: Student and Staff PIs for FE Colleges in Scotland 2004-05  
[http://www.sfc.ac.uk/publications/FE\\_Staff\\_and\\_Student\\_PIs\\_2004-05.pdf](http://www.sfc.ac.uk/publications/FE_Staff_and_Student_PIs_2004-05.pdf)

The college sector's response to the Government's inclusiveness agenda centres on FE provision. Full-time FE provision falls into two categories, namely:

- programmes leading to a national award devised and endorsed by a standard-setting body such as the Hair and Beauty Industry Association (HABIA) or Science, Engineering, Manufacturing Technologies Alliance (SEMTA). These programmes consist of a number of prescribed units of learning, for example, Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) units, or units developed by another recognised awarding body such as City & Guilds.
- programmes leading to an award devised by the college. These programmes consist of a number of units of learning (normally 20) made up of either accredited units such as SQA units, or non-accredited units, or a mixture of both. As the content of this type of programme is not prescribed by another body, inclusion in the curriculum of specific learning experiences such as core skills development is dependent on college policies.

Colleges choose which types of awards they offer. Nationally-recognised awards endorsed by standard-setting bodies enhance learners' job mobility. However, in some cases colleges consider that the level and units within these awards are not the best fit for their learners and instead opt to offer locally-devised programmes in line with the needs and aspirations of their learners and local employers. These programmes are generally vocational in nature and pitched around Intermediate 2 and Higher level. They provide a broad range of learning experiences including introductions to specific vocational areas for a diverse range of learners including school leavers, adult returners and employees. Learners require few, if any, formal qualifications for entry to most programmes. However, in some vocational areas learners require a specific level of skill in, for example, mathematics and colleges may specify formal qualifications for entry. Attainment of the award usually presents opportunities for learners to progress to higher education programmes, employment and/or further vocational training.

The relationship between access and inclusion, and attainment at this level of provision is complex. The college sector has developed and improved its provision to respond to the access and inclusion agenda and has become better at attracting under-represented participants. Some learners embarking on FE programmes do so for reasons other than attaining a formal qualification, such as social integration and personal development. At present, systems to chart the progress of individual learners are not yet sufficiently developed or used widely enough to provide an accurate picture of achievement in the wider sense. What is clear is that learners are entering programmes with a wide range of ability and skill levels that colleges need to address if learners are to achieve specific formal qualifications.

The HMIE report<sup>2</sup> for the SFC, *Analysis of HMIE Reviews of Quality and Standards in Further Education (2004-2005)*, identified the following strengths in quality element A5: *Learning and teaching process*.

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<sup>2</sup> Latest in annual series

- Colleges were successfully motivating their learners to be involved in classroom activities and adopt positive attitudes to their studies.
- Colleges had planned and deployed effective and appropriate learning and teaching approaches. This contributed significantly to fostering the interest of learners, ensuring their interest was maintained, and generally enriching the learning experience.
- Staff set suitably challenging standards for learners which were clearly linked to industry expectations.
- Staff encouraged learners to develop reflective learning and creative skills and be independent in their approach to learning.
- There were effective relationships between staff and learners which contributed to effective learning.

Weaknesses included:

- inadequate use (in specific colleges) by staff, of ICT resources to support learning;
- the deployment of too narrow a range of teaching approaches by staff; and
- Staff not systematically checking learners' understanding or providing effective feedback.

Similarly, the report identified the following strengths in A7: *Learner progress and outcomes*.

- Building upon prior achievements, learners generally made good progress and were developing appropriate knowledge and skill.
- There were effective transition arrangements for learners to employment or further study.
- Learners were achieving their learning goals.
- Evidence of good levels of wider achievement helped learners improve their employability skills.

Weaknesses included:

- specific attainment and retention issues for individual courses within each of the subject areas reviewed; and
- insufficient development of learners' core skills.

Other significant factors that had a positive impact on A5 and A7 were:

- the utilisation of personal learning plans which helped learners make good progress; and
- a wide range of appropriate provision delivered at times and in locations convenient to learners which met their needs well.

A negative factor which emerged from the *Other significant factors* was the insufficient use of programme and unit attainment data in the analysis and evaluation of the effectiveness of programme delivery, accompanied by poor action planning.

There are challenges for colleges in terms of meeting the curricular needs of a group of individuals so diverse in abilities, needs and aspirations. The examples identified in this report illustrate curriculum approaches and developments that have enhanced the experience of this group of learners. They also illustrate arrangements that have helped staff to engage

in the process of evolving a curriculum and cross-college services to help learners sustain their learning in order to attain a qualification or develop wider skills.

The task drew on the general findings of HMIE's review programme but focused on curriculum approaches and developments employed by six colleges. Visits by HM Inspectors to these colleges explored the following aspects:

**Curriculum design and planning**  
**The learning experience**  
**Supporting and developing learners**  
**Partnership working**  
**Evaluation and quality enhancement**

The visits by HM Inspectors had a particular focus on identifying good practice. A number of examples of good practice identified will be mounted on the HMIE website at <http://www.hmie.gov.uk/hmiegoodpractice/default.aspx> during November 2006.

## **2 Curriculum planning and design**

### **2.1 College ethos and promotion of values**

In each of the six colleges, the personal, social and economic transformational value of FE provision was promoted and recognised by staff throughout the organisation. Each of the college principals had a significant interest and commitment to widening access and social inclusion, and promoted achievement of the individual as a cornerstone of that agenda. College managers and staff showed a genuine understanding and awareness of their learners' needs and difficulties resulting from poverty, social and personal issues and disabilities. As one senior manager put it:

*There are people here who would not have been here five years ago. Their circumstances have not changed. They are still living difficult lives; still living in poverty; still have a serious disability or health issue. We can't change these things but we can adapt what we do to help them get here, turn up, feel okay about what they are learning, and leave with what they aspired to.*

Principals and senior managers addressed all staff at key points of the college year to reinforce the importance of supporting learners undertaking these programmes. In most cases, colleges had developed a strapline or statement to illustrate and promote this commitment to all staff and external partners. One example was "Celebrate success - Support students - Help them achieve". In another college a strapline, "The college cares about me - The college values me - I can succeed", was included on all college promotional materials and learner handouts, and at the top of all self-evaluation and programme review documentation. Most colleges in the sector regularly produced newsletters based on these themes. Staff contributed to articles and held events to share their experience and good practice. The reinforcing of these themes played a significant role in directing and supporting staff towards developing and delivering an FE curriculum focused strongly on learner needs within an overarching ethos of empowering learners. Curriculum planning concentrated on what worked for learners, where learners wanted to progress to, and what skills they needed to achieve that.

## 2.2 Identification of need

All six colleges considered that it was critical to create a learning experience that was sufficiently flexible to accommodate the diverse needs and aspirations of their learners. For example, a class group could include a recently-made-redundant 45-year-old factory worker seeking skills to re-enter employment, a 16-year-old girl who left school with few formal qualifications after a pattern of non-attendance and a 35-year-old woman who left school with two Highers and was now seeking access to higher education. As one college manager said:

*People are at different stages at different times. Young people often require a year or two to settle, find themselves and grow up - they need time. Others, particularly older people, are uncertain and nervous about taking up learning as part of a complete life change. We don't try and simply shoehorn these learners into rigid programmes.*

In all colleges, staff teams used a variety of methods to gain feedback from existing learners to inform programme planning. Methods included class focus groups on topics such as the helpfulness of teaching materials, course content and access to learning resources. A few colleges had surveyed learners to ascertain the different concerns and anxieties they had about committing to a full-time programme of learning and had made good use of their findings to engage staff in discussing methods of easing these tensions. All six colleges involved in the task perceived similar barriers to learner retention and success at this level. In order of decreasing significance, they were:

- lack of learner confidence (often directly related to a negative previous experience of learning);
- lack of staff and learner awareness of individual skill levels at entry, in terms of both vocational and core skills;
- lack of learner understanding of learning and assessment practices; and
- ineffective transition from previous learning to the college environment.

The Scottish Executive's drive to increase participation had resulted in all colleges reviewing existing provision and adopting a fresh approach to programme planning.

Many learners undertaking FE programmes had personal circumstances and/or other commitments that had the potential to strain their ability to complete their studies and attain. All six colleges noted a direct link between disadvantage and poor learner retention and success. There was significant concern from staff that people who were most likely to benefit from learning were also most likely to leave before completing their programme. In addition the recording and publicising of retention and attainment patterns had the potential to discourage staff from accepting learners who presented more of a risk in terms of completing their programme. In an attempt to minimise this risk, staff had developed a range of approaches to encourage and assist learners maintain their studies. Most of these approaches focused on accommodating the significant disparities in the circumstances, skills, experiences, ages and aspirations of learners. Colleges addressed the disparities variously through arrangements for learners to:

- access preparatory programmes prior to the start of programmes or as part of the induction process;
- access units of learning at a level and pace appropriate to their existing skills and with opportunity for progression;
- access and sustain learning despite potentially irregular attendance, for example, by learners with health issues, or who were carers or shift workers;
- be involved in decisions about their own learning including target setting and reflection on progress; and
- access appropriate support as and when required.

The length of a programme was a significant factor in enabling specific groups of learners to attain, in particular young people with a history of poor engagement and adults with low self-esteem and few or no formal qualifications. Some colleges provided learners with more time than one academic year to enable them to progress from Intermediate 1 or 2 to Intermediate 2 or Higher level. In some cases programmes were delivered full-time over two years with a heavier input on learning and study skills, guidance and support, and development of core skills.

Each of the six colleges actively used labour market information, particularly at local level, to inform programme development. Strong links with local employers and lead bodies helped staff to tailor provision to meet industry needs both within a local context and in line with national initiatives. Involvement of employers at senior management and departmental level contributed positively to programme design and contributed to a wide range of learning activities which enhanced learner employability. Staff often made good use of recent and ongoing industrial updating to incorporate work placements and current work practices within learning activities.

Most colleges directed staff teams to identify the next level of appropriate programme, such as HNC, and construct learning activities which would best prepare learners for progression. In one programme, staff had identified that learners progressing from FE to the HNC-Level programme performed less well than learners coming straight on to the HNC programme from schools or industry. They asked staff delivering the HNC programme to identify areas which caused learners most difficulty and used this information to adjust the FE curriculum. These changes to the FE curriculum resulted in a significant improvement in attainment in the HNC programme the following year.

### ***2.3 Staff involvement in programme planning***

The majority of colleges in the sector actively encouraged staff to work together on issues pertaining to the learner experience beyond their specific departmental context. In these colleges, teaching and support staff worked well together in the planning of programme content and incorporated wider activities to support and enhance the learning process. In one of the six colleges visited, a member of the marketing team was assigned to each curricular area to gather intelligence on employment trends and advise staff on methods of promoting new programmes. However, such collaborative approaches were not applied consistently across all departments. There were missed opportunities for capitalising on the broad range of staff skills and expertise in developing provision to meet the diverse range of learner needs.



## **2.4 *Proposal and approval processes***

All colleges had well-established and rigorous procedures for proposing and approving new programmes. These procedures required staff to develop programmes in line with college policies and practice.

Effective collaboration between staff responsible for quality, student support and curriculum was important in programme planning and approval processes. This collaboration ensured that staff in these key areas were collectively involved in using their knowledge of learner needs in best shaping programme content and advancing organisational priorities such as development of employability, citizenship and core skills. Within this process, they also identified the development needs of staff to deliver the programme successfully.

## **2.5 *Key messages***

- In each of the six colleges the principal and senior managers conveyed strongly to all staff the personal, social and economic transformational value of FE provision.
- Across the sector, a college-wide focus on widening access and social inclusion underpinned new approaches to curriculum design at FE level.
- Effective curriculum planning processes focused strongly on what works for learners, where learners want to progress to, and what skills they need to do that.
- Effective and responsive curriculum planning provided good opportunities for specific groups of learners to develop their skills over a longer period of time.
- Each of the six colleges made effective use of labour-market information, particularly at local level, to inform programme development.
- Strong links with employers at senior management and departmental levels contributed positively to programme design and to a wide range of learning activities which enhanced learner employability.
- Effective collaboration between teaching and support staff in the planning of programmes resulted in a wider and more responsive range of learning activities which supported and enhanced the learning process.
- All colleges had well-established and rigorous procedures for proposing and approving new programmes. These procedures took good account of learner needs, the local context and opportunities for progression.

However,

- effective collaboration between teaching and support staff in the planning of programmes did not take place consistently across all college departments. As a result, some programme teams missed opportunities for developing services and provision to meet the diverse range of learner needs.

### **3 The learning experience**

#### **3.1 *Staff-student relationships***

Effective and very positive relationships between learners and teaching staff contributed significantly to learner retention and success. All of the six colleges visited considered the relationship between learners and college staff to be particularly important at FE level. One college was exploring how teaching staff teach and was engaged with the thought, “If a lecturer in catering can make great cakes, does that mean he can teach others how to do it?” This had been further considered under a college project, “It’s not what you teach it’s the way that you teach it”, which was investigating the connection between effective teaching skills and vocational expertise.

Specific types of learning and teaching approaches were more effective in engaging and retaining learners undertaking programmes at this level. Two of the colleges visited were currently exploring this topic and had concluded that essential staff skills included communicator, motivator, encourager, supporter and linker with other college departments. These colleges perceived that staff who found teaching these programmes challenging and rewarding contributed more effectively than others who did not feel naturally suited to working with this client group. One college was piloting a scheme to match staff interest to specific areas of provision and had asked staff to declare a particular interest in FE and community programmes.

One college considered that in a small number of vocational areas there was a ‘rank’ issue amongst a few staff as to which level they taught, with HN programmes being considered more important in terms of professional status. This college had delivered staff development programmes to focus on these issues and challenge staff perceptions.

#### **3.2 *Design and planning of learning activities***

All six colleges made effective use of locally-devised programmes to create a learning experience which matched the interest, skills and aspirations of learners with local employer needs. There were many good examples of programmes being planned around the development of social, vocational and personal skills to prepare learners for securing and sustaining employment. These programmes were particularly effective in re-engaging hesitant older learners and young people who were not in employment, education or training (NEET).

In some colleges, senior managers made additional resources available as *challenge funds* to assist staff to enhance or widen the range of learning activities. These funds enabled development of new materials, adoption of new learning and teaching approaches, and support for activities to underpin and contextualise learning such as fieldwork and visits to employers. One of the six colleges, whose catchment included a regeneration area, provided an annual opportunity for teaching departments to bid for additional resources to improve college-wide performance through a *Making things better for disadvantaged learners* challenge fund.

Almost all programmes were made up from units which provided an appropriate balance across vocational skills, learning and study skills, core skills and personal development (guidance). Colleges constructed most programmes from accredited SQA or other awarding

body units in order to provide learners with formal recognition of their achievements. There were many good examples of accreditation from other bodies also being embedded within SQA-based programmes to provide learners with further endorsement of skills, and currency within specific industries. For example, within sports and leisure leadership programmes learners undertook ski-coaching and team-leader qualifications. Staff arranged for learners to participate in national competitions and formal award schemes. Such arrangements were highly motivational for learners.

There were more than a few examples of effective programmes which were accredited only through the award of a college certificate. In most cases, these programmes had been designed for a very specific client group in response to local or community needs. In some cases, staff considered that other educational sectors and employers undervalued programmes which were not externally accredited. Some colleges were looking to the piloting of SCQF credit rating by colleges to address this issue. One college considered that staff had insufficient knowledge of wider resources and other awarding bodies such as the Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN). This college had put in place arrangements to inform staff of other educational and training programmes. A resource bank encouraged staff to consider a wider range of materials and options in light of learner needs. In one college, art and design staff had constructed their programmes from The Open College of the Arts curriculum to provide a greater degree of flexibility and more opportunity for individualised learning.

In each of the six colleges staff teams had started to reflect on the range and 'mix' of teaching approaches a learner would encounter across their individual programme area. In a few of these colleges, subject staff had mapped individual classes across a day and sandwiched the teaching of theory between practical situations to help maintain interest and engagement. This had improved attendance and engagement in these programmes. However, in a few cases teaching staff delivering specific parts of programmes maintained an unhelpfully insular approach to planning and delivery.

All six colleges considered that for many secondary school pupils the progression to FE full-time programmes was 'not always a good fit'. Most were of the view that the majority of school leavers entering full-time FE programmes did not have the required level of communication and independent learning skills. The learning and assessment gradient was therefore often too steep, especially at the early stages of their programme. To try and address this, colleges were contextualising units to develop these skills and positioning them earlier in the programmes. Part-time programmes for school pupils had helped to overcome this issue, as staff were able to include and reinforce development of these skills in preparation for full-time programmes.

To motivate and reassure under-confident learners, the majority of staff teams positioned practical activities at the start of programmes and gradually incorporated application of theory and core skills alongside these activities. However, in some colleges staff did not always consider sufficiently the impact of the sequencing of units when designing programmes and in some cases, sequencing was driven by the availability of staff. Some learners did not always have the opportunity to learn things in an appropriate order. For example, elements such as *using IT* were not placed early enough in some programmes to enhance and support further study. However, there were many good examples of staff integrating application of core skills within vocational activities, which had helped increase learner confidence and ability to apply these skills to different contexts. Well-considered

sequencing of units contributed to a more effective and holistic experience which enabled learners to link different aspects of their learning. This improved learner motivation and engagement.

### **3.3     *Design and planning of assessment***

Most colleges encouraged course teams to spread assessment evenly across programmes. However, in a few cases insufficient planning of assessment placed a considerable burden on learners. One college had identified that in a particular two-week block, learners had been asked to undergo a large number of assessments that could have been avoided if programme teams had taken better account of what learners were being asked to do and when. The college rearranged assessments to provide some 'breathing space' and time for consolidation, which had improved attendance and attainment. Colleges included information on assessment within their induction programme and provided learners with an assessment schedule detailing the modes of assessment, expected standards and dates. However, learners were not always provided with this information early enough to enable them to plan their studies around their personal and work commitments.

Many older learners undertaking this level of programme had little or no experience of the style or language of current assessment modes and as a result were apprehensive and uncertain of the process. As a result of other initiatives such as *Preparing learners for learning*<sup>3</sup> most colleges were adapting their induction procedures and handbooks for learners to provide a more comprehensive introduction. In some cases, mock assessments were used effectively to help learners gain understanding and familiarity of different modes of assessment. In a few of the colleges, learners had access to assessment on demand. This practice enabled learners to negotiate and agree with tutors a point at which they felt ready to undertake assessment. One college had identified that learners who missed assessments due to illness, work or personal reasons often did not have sufficient opportunity to retake the assessment due to other commitments and the pace of the programme. It opened a Saturday morning assessment unit which enabled learners to book and undertake assessments they had missed.

### **3.4     *Vocational development***

Within full-time FE programmes, many learners needed time to develop their social and interpersonal skills in order to obtain and sustain employment or progress to further learning. This was particularly important in programmes which had been designed to meet the needs of the NEET group and others who had become educationally disaffected. Staff incorporated activities to encourage personal awareness and development of these skills within the vocational context.

Most vocational programmes incorporated a range of activities to inform and prepare learners for the world of work. These included work placements, visits to industry and presentations from local employers and employees. These activities were highly effective in reinforcing the link between college-based learning and work-based practice. They also helped learners to reflect and refine their individual work and career aspirations.

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<sup>3</sup> Preparing Learners for Learning HMIE Quality enhancement project for SFC. Key principles document sent to all colleges.

Most teaching staff had pertinent experience or awareness of current industrial practice. They made good use of this knowledge and expertise to create relevant and realistic tasks and assignments which encouraged self-management and responsibility. There were good examples of activities which helped learners increase their awareness of the broader work environment. These activities developed skills such as communication with others and dealing with complex situations. In the majority of cases, learning environments were organised to simulate the workplace and provided good opportunities for learners to practice and develop their skills in line with current industry requirements. Almost all learners enjoyed feeling part of the world of work and applying new skills within a work context.

### **3.5 Core skills development**

All of the six colleges had made the decision to include core skills development within their locally-devised FE programmes as part of improving skills for employability and life. Each college had identified that core skills attainment in a significant number of programmes was low or very low. In addition, around half of learners<sup>4</sup> entering FE programmes did not have a sufficient standard of literacy and numeracy skills to attain the prescribed level of these units within programmes. Staff were involved in an ongoing process to find ways of addressing this through additional flexible learning at the start of programmes, learning support or differentiated learning.

Early profiling of core skills was necessary in placing learners on core skill units appropriate to their level of ability and needs. One college stated:

*We are trying to take all the steps we can to avoid setting people up to fail, especially as we know they will be able to handle the vocational aspects of the course. We therefore try not to place people on units that we know from the outset they are not ready to achieve.*

The methods employed by colleges to carry out core skill profiling varied considerably between whole-college initiatives and individual departmental arrangements. They ranged from a voluntary process through which learners were encouraged to attend special sessions at the college prior to entry, to a mandatory approach carried out at induction. All of the six colleges were evolving processes to deal with core skills profiling and were firming up arrangements for promoting, managing and coordinating this activity. They used a range of college and departmentally-devised materials and interactive IT packages. However, in more than a few cases the arrangements for colleges to deal with literacy and numeracy issues as part of, or outwith, the core skills agenda were not clear. There was confusion between the roles of learning support staff and communication staff as to who was responsible for the planning and delivery of provision to improve literacy.

All six colleges had developed strategies to accommodate the range of learners' core skill levels. These strategies included differentiated learning within class groups, discrete programmes, flexible learning materials and learning support services. Vocationally contextualised learning was more effective in engaging and enabling learners to develop and achieve core skills. Overall arrangements for the delivery of *problem solving* and *working with others* worked well. Teaching staff were able to integrate these units within their

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<sup>4</sup> Changing Lives: Adult Literacy and Numeracy in Scotland: HMIE 2005

vocational area. Arrangements for the delivery of *communication, numeracy* and *information technology* were more complex. They tended to fall into three categories:

- discrete units, delivered by staff responsible for these core skills;
- integrated or discrete units, vocationally contextualised and delivered by vocational staff; and
- discrete or integrated units, vocationally contextualised and jointly developed and delivered by subject and vocational staff.

All six colleges were in the process of implementing a college-wide approach to contextualising core skills. In areas where this worked effectively, staff teaching vocational subjects worked closely with communication and numeracy lecturers to develop vocationally-specific materials and in some cases jointly-delivered specific aspects of programmes. In more than a few cases, joint planning and delivery of core skills by learning support staff and staff teaching vocational subjects was highly effective in assisting learners to gain new skills. Proactive and responsive team teaching had significantly helped to reduce the stigma often associated with learner support. This encouraged learners to access help when they needed further explanation or time to understand or apply a new concept. In some colleges a specialist tutor worked in the classroom to provide learning support in core skills to learners undertaking vocational activities. This deployment linked core and vocational skills in the minds of learners and provided highly contextualised, individualised support. In departments where these approaches were more fully developed, learners were further engaged and retention and achievement in core skills was higher.

### **3.6 Key messages**

- Effective and very positive relationships between learners and teaching staff contributed significantly to learner retention and success.
- Where colleges combined effectively the development of vocational skills, learning and study skills and core skills they provided a comprehensive learning experience which prepared learners well for work or further learning.
- There were many good examples of accreditation from other bodies being embedded within SQA-based programmes to provide learners with further endorsement of skills and currency within specific industries.
- Reflection by staff teams on the whole learning experience was beginning to result in better linking of theory to practical activities, more even assessment scheduling and more effective sequencing of units. All of these factors contributed to improved learner engagement, retention and attainment.
- Most vocational programmes incorporated effective and appropriate activities which informed and prepared learners for the world of work. These activities sustained and encouraged learner motivation and significantly helped learners to reflect and refine their individual work and career aspirations.
- The inclusion and contextualisation of core skills within locally-devised programmes was successful in engaging learners in developing valuable skills for employability and life. Vocationally-contextualised delivery and application of these skills increased learner motivation and improved retention and attainment.
- The majority of colleges across the sector made good use of early profiling of core skills to place learners on core skill units appropriate to their level of ability and needs.



- Where effective joint planning and delivery of core skills took place between learning support staff and staff teaching vocational subjects, learner achievement in core skills was better.

However,

- in a few cases an insular approach to planning and delivery by teaching staff resulted in staff teams overlooking key issues and barriers to achievement; and
- in more than a few cases arrangements for the planning, coordination and delivery of literacy and numeracy skills (as part of, or outwith the core skills agenda) were not clear.

## 4 Supporting and developing learners

### 4.1 Guidance arrangements

The inclusion of regular, structured guidance and support was a critical factor in assisting learners on FE programmes to sustain their studies and achieve their individual goals. The majority of colleges in the sector had reviewed and revised their guidance arrangements. Some had revisited previous methods of resourcing and delivering induction, ongoing and pre-exit guidance, including the use of guidance units. Most colleges had stopped using these units a number of years ago in preference for more informal and less resource-intensive methods of delivery. However, recently some colleges had reintroduced these units to their FE programmes to provide a more formal structure for learners to engage in activities to improve their performance. There was increasing collaboration between and across support and teaching functions to identify and remove barriers to learning and provide effective support structures. As one college noted:

*We can't make people better off (financially) or visually impaired people see, but we can remove the barriers for each of them and support them on their journey.*

Across the sector, support services were highly visible and promoted throughout college sites. In most cases, they operated out of a one-stop-shop where staff with a range of roles in areas such as finance, childcare, careers, and welfare could easily cross-refer. In these cases, learners were able to seek assistance easily and quickly. Outreach facilities also provided direct referral to centralised college staff. One college with a significant outreach provision had trained non-college staff working in these centres on college referral practices and procedures. In addition, colleges had established strong links with external support agencies to provide learners with access to specialist support such as counselling. Learners with additional support needs had good access to a wide range of services including extended learning support (ELS) and assistive technologies to support learning.

Staff encouraged learners to identify any barriers or anxieties they had about their ability to achieve and used this information to develop and deliver appropriate support. In some colleges, teaching and support staff jointly interviewed learners for this purpose prior to entry. They then made arrangements to supply any additional information and made referrals to specialist staff to provide additional support. In these colleges, teaching staff had increased their awareness of issues which had the potential to have a detrimental effect on learner retention and achievement, such as financial and personal circumstances. Support

staff became more conversant with programme content and requirements of individual programme areas, and used this information to provide more in-depth advice to potential learners.

Learners who had negative experiences of prior learning or work were more likely to conceal difficulties because of fear of failure or attracting critical comment. Colleges encouraged staff to be proactive in checking on early progress and response to the learning environment. As one college manager stated:

*They try to hide difficulties because they have become used to failing. They have learned to roll with failure. They think that any time we ask to see them they are going to get yelled at. Sometimes, by the time we get them to talk to us, it is too late. Then all we can do is patch things.*

To resource this early checking of progress, some colleges had increased structured guidance and support activities during the first few months of programmes. They included weekly timetabled guidance in which learners used personal learning plans to set individual targets, reflect on their own progress, identify areas of success or concern, develop strategies to overcome difficulties and set further targets. As part of a range of measures, this had significantly improved retention across most programme areas.

#### **4.2 Preparing for learning**

A general view held across the six colleges was that many learners who left programmes early did so because they had enrolled on a programme that was not appropriate to their needs or interests. Of this group more than a few learners did not have sufficient understanding of the vocational nature and content of their chosen programme prior to entry. For example, in some vocational areas, such as hospitality, learners did not have enough knowledge of the part of the industry to which the programme related. Some learners did not expect core skills development to be included in their programme. Each of the six colleges was adjusting selection processes to address this information deficit. Most of them had hosted departmental and college-wide events for staff of local secondary schools and Careers Scotland to ensure they had up-to-date and comprehensive information on the nature and content of FE programmes.

The majority of colleges across the sector had identified that contact with learners between acceptance and start of programmes provided opportunities to engage learners in preparing for them. They made various arrangements to provide learners with opportunities for brushing up on existing skills and developing new ones. This included topics such as learning how to use a computer, report writing and confidence building. However, in more than a few cases these arrangements were not planned well enough or promoted sufficiently.

In some college departments, learners were brought together prior to the start of their programme to meet each other and their tutors and learn more about the content of their programme. There were good examples of summer activities which helped school leavers adapt to an adult learning environment.

In a few colleges, effective and responsive arrangements with community learning providers helped learners progress from informal learning situations to college-based FE programmes. This included community group visits to their local college and partial delivery of community



programmes on college sites. Effective collaboration with staff in local secondary schools helped to ensure that school leavers, particularly the more vulnerable, received appropriate help and support.

All colleges delivered induction to all learners undertaking FE programmes. However, induction programmes were too often mechanistic and compliance-driven. Of the six colleges, three had recently reviewed induction arrangements as part of a wider investigation of retention on FE programmes. These colleges had substantially altered their induction arrangements. One college-wide initiative focused on giving learners information and skills when they needed them as opposed to concentrating these activities in the first few days. Induction was integrated within vocational and structured guidance activities and spread across the initial eight weeks of the programme. The college considered that this shift in approach had significantly improved early retention and described its new arrangements as being its most effective and successful intervention in the retention of learners. Integration and sequencing of induction activities across the first few weeks or months also helped those who joined programmes later to access information and support that they would have missed had these activities been condensed within the first few days.

#### **4.3    *Developing confident learners***

Most colleges experienced difficulties with small numbers of younger learners displaying inappropriate behaviours. A few had addressed this through successful college initiatives which promoted positive behaviour and respect for others. In most cases these initiatives focused on individual and group responsibility and the impact of actions on others. A few colleges made good use of enterprise activities and learner involvement in local projects to develop self-awareness and citizenship. In most cases, learners responded positively to these approaches, adapted their behaviour appropriately and took better account of the needs of others.

The process of engaging learners in reflecting on their own progress was effective in helping them to recognise their own achievements and explore ways of overcoming barriers to attainment. Across the six colleges visited there were good examples of use of personal learning plans within a structured guidance process to engage learners in these activities. In some programmes learners were encouraged to consider the types of learning approaches they found most useful and those they felt less comfortable with, and apply this process to form strategies to improve their performance. As a result, many increased their self-confidence and took more responsibility for managing their learning.

The majority of learners undertaking FE programmes did not have sufficient confidence or study skills to engage successfully in independent learning. Some colleges had carefully devised resources and activities to help learners develop and extend these skills. In all cases, these activities were broken into small segments of learning which became progressively more challenging. Learners were provided with clear direction on how to carry out these activities and had access to a member of staff for assistance or support. There were good examples of learner resource staff working with staff teaching vocational subjects to design activities which gradually built up investigative skills and use of electronic resources. In more than a few programmes, staff integrated short independent learning activities effectively into class activities. The focus on making these learning activities manageable for learners helped them to reflect on their achievement and most gained confidence in self-directed learning.

Colleges were developing methods and tools to track learner progress and achievement of wider skills such as personal, learning and core skills, and other skills for employment. In most cases, staff and learners recorded skills within personal learning plans. However, most colleges were uncertain as to how appropriate their approaches were or how these approaches compared with other practice across the sector.

#### **4.4 Key messages**

- The inclusion of regular, structured guidance and support, especially in the first few months, was effective in assisting learners to sustain their studies and achieve their individual goals.
- Meaningful collaboration between support and teaching functions helped colleges to remove barriers to learning and develop effective structures of support.
- Proactive and regular monitoring of the early progress of learners, linked to arrangements for learner reflection and target setting, successfully improved retention.
- School link programmes and summer activities were effective in assisting school leavers adapt to the college environment.
- A stronger focus on learner needs within the induction process significantly improved early retention.
- Where college initiatives focused on responsibility and the impact of actions on others, they were generally successful in engendering appropriate behaviour and regard for others.
- The process of engaging learners in reflecting on their own progress encouraged them to recognise their own achievements and explore ways of overcoming barriers to attainment. This improved self-confidence.
- The structuring of independent learning activities into small segments of learning which became progressively more challenging, successfully developed learner confidence in self-directed study.

However,

- in most cases induction programmes did not take sufficient account of learner needs; and
- most colleges were uncertain as to how appropriate their approaches were to tracking learners' progress in wider skills such as personal, learning and core skills, and other skills for employment.

## **5 Partnership working**

### **5.1 *Engagement with partnership agencies: employers, enterprise companies, community learning and development providers and voluntary organisations***

National and sectoral priorities in social inclusion and easing access had encouraged colleges to engage more widely with each other and external partners on issues related to curriculum design and modes of delivery. All six colleges worked with their community partners to identify and target groups of learners who had a history of non-participation. Senior and departmental staff made good use of partnership forums and networking activities to gather intelligence about local industry and community requirements.

Colleges had developed links with different organisations to encourage and ease participation in FE programmes. These included organisations which could be involved in contributing to the learning experience such as community learning and development partnerships, regeneration partnerships, local enterprise companies, Careers Scotland, local secondary schools, local authority community learning and development providers, employers, enterprise trusts and local community organisations.

Effective collaboration with community learning partners had the potential to encourage and ease participation, and enhance the learning experience. Colleges worked with key partners through the community planning processes to promote access to learning. However, in most cases, local arrangements for joint planning of provision to encourage and ease transition to full-time FE programmes were not well established.

Colleges had some way to go in terms of making sure that their key partners understood the current college context and content of FE-level programmes. College managers were adopting different approaches to promoting and explaining provision to colleagues from partner organisations. There were a few good examples of joint working which had directly enhanced the confidence and skill levels of learners prior to entry. Of these, the most common category was effective arrangements with community-based adult learning providers that helped to ease transition from informal learning to formal FE programmes. In the majority of colleges, key partners were not sufficiently aware of the current college context and content of FE programmes to enable them to engage actively in developing complementary provision and services.

There were a few good examples of effective joint working with employers and enterprise companies to address local industry needs. In the main, these examples centred around a collaborative approach to identifying gaps in provision and development of programmes to respond to these needs. In some college departments, direct involvement of local employers in curriculum design had enhanced and widened the learning experience. The ‘visibility’ of employer involvement in programme design was a highly motivational factor for learners.

## **5.2 Key messages**

- Social inclusion and easing access had encouraged colleges to engage more widely with each other and external partners on issues related to curriculum design and modes of delivery.
- Senior and departmental staff made good use of partnership forums and networking activities to gather intelligence about local industry and community requirements.
- Successful transition from informal learning to formal FE programmes depended on effective joint working with community-based adult learning providers.
- The ‘visibility’ of employer involvement in programme design was a highly motivational factor for learners.

However,

- in most cases, local arrangements for joint planning of provision to encourage and ease transition to full-time FE programmes were not well established; and
- in the majority of colleges, key partners were not sufficiently aware of the current college context and content of FE programmes to enable them to engage actively in developing complementary provision and services.

## **6 Evaluation and quality enhancement**

### **6.1 Evaluation and review procedures**

Effective processes for involving all staff in reviewing and improving programme performance were useful and beneficial to the overall learning experience. College managers had recognised that a few staff, particularly temporary, part-time lecturers, were apprehensive about raising issues pertaining to low retention or attainment and these managers reinforced the supportive nature of intervention. As one manager explained:

*We go out of our way to let staff know we won't just cut the programme. We will adjust and amend the things that aren't working and keep the bits that are (working). As a result staff are more likely to bring out issues as they arise and don't wait until the formal cycle of review meetings.*

Each of the colleges considered that any programme with a Student Programme Achievement Ratio (SPAR) of 75% or below required intervention and had identified a number of programmes performing below this threshold. Of these programmes, a few had a very low SPAR of 50% or below. The majority of such programmes were targeted at learners from areas of deprivation and school leavers with few or no formal qualifications. Programmes which were performing above the threshold but had shown a downward trend in retention or attainment over two consecutive years were also considered as requiring further investigation.

In most of the six colleges, when programmes were identified as requiring further investigation, curriculum and quality teams brought other members of staff on board whom they considered able to contribute to the improvement process, such as guidance and support, marketing and finance staff. In addition, teaching staff from other vocational areas that had experienced and overcome similar difficulties were invited to share their solutions. Student representatives were also invited to attend review meetings to provide a learner perspective.

Two of the six colleges had developed retention and achievement strategies which formed the basis for programme action plans. These action plans provided a useful framework for teaching and support staff to discuss and implement changes for improvement. In one college, the senior managers responsible for curriculum and quality met with the subject managers and developed a programme action plan to improve performance. Progress was discussed through, monthly meetings during which action points were reviewed and adapted.

Across the sector staff, teams used the SFC/HMIE Quality Framework to discuss and evaluate the learner experience, identify areas for improvement and set targets to enhance the learner experience. The focus on *learning and teaching* and *learner progress and outcomes* had stimulated joint working between teaching and support staff. There were good examples

of support staff taking part in programme review meetings to provide further insight on issues pertaining to learner engagement. In the six colleges, creativity and innovation of staff was encouraged and considered a valuable asset in making improvements, as opposed to being discouraged as risk laden.

Most support managers used global end-of-year data with their staff teams to evaluate and develop services. A few reviewed college data at specific times of the year to identify patterns and trends within departmental areas. However, in most cases they did not use retention and attainment information on an ongoing basis to monitor and analyse wider college trends. As a result, support staff tended to react to problems identified by curriculum and quality staff rather than engaging proactively with college data to identify issues that might be directly related to the preparation or support of learners.

All six colleges considered that the Student Achievement Ratio by Unit (SARU) was the most effective measurement of learner attainment as it provided relatively rapid feedback. However, this information was not always available immediately when individual units were integrated to form a larger or wider learning experience. In these cases, arrangements for collating attainment data across units were often lengthy, sometimes stretching over the full duration of the programme. Curriculum managers were not able to identify attainment issues early enough to provide appropriate intervention.

Methods for gaining learner feedback on programme content and delivery ranged from feedback from learners at the end of a unit regarding areas they found easy or difficult, to scheduled meetings with groups of learners at the end of assessment blocks to look at the overall learning experience. Learner feedback was useful in helping staff to identify and change the curriculum and approaches which were not motivating or effective. A few colleges considered there was a potential conflict of interest when teaching staff directly involved in delivering programmes facilitated feedback from learners. One college had recently implemented a scheme whereby marketing or support staff facilitated learner feedback. They reported that this approach provided better quality and consistency of information.

Colleges experienced different levels of success with regard to learner representation at programme team meetings and course reviews. This was most successful when there was an active students' association or equivalent and there were identified class representatives.

## **6.2     *Staff development***

Over the last decade, widening access and participation had presented both opportunities and challenges for all college staff. The response to the report of the Beattie Committee, New Deal, the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 as amended, the Race Relations Amendment Act (RRAA) 2000 and, more recently, the Education (Additional Support for Learning) Scotland Act 2004 place responsibilities on colleges to adjust and amend provision to meet the needs of a wider range of learners.

In the six colleges, managers considered that staff understanding of inclusiveness issues was fundamental to realising appropriate FE provision. To build the capacity of their staff in meeting this agenda, they made attendance at training events on the DDA and the RRAA mandatory for all staff. Ongoing workshops on inclusiveness topics such as supporting learners with dyslexia, dealing with challenging behaviours, and making adjustments to the

learning environment, helped staff to anticipate and respond to specific needs of individuals and groups. Colleges had received training for staff in the use of assistive technologies through Beattie Resources for Inclusive Technologies in Education (BRITE) to support learners with specific barriers to learning.

To deliver effective FE provision all staff had to understand their own role in removing barriers which prevented learners from attending, participating and achieving. For example, library and learning centre staff had to consider access to resources for shift workers and remote learners, and food service staff had to take account of cultural and religious dietary requirements.

As part of the widening access agenda, most colleges had identified an increase in inappropriate behaviour which interrupted or constrained the learning experience. The majority had developed strategies and arranged staff development programmes to deal with issues such as disengagement and latecoming. One college had established a retention and achievement toolkit to assist staff in dealing with these issues. The toolkit consisted of a database which provided information under a range of headings, such as dealing with drugs, erratic attendance, and non-engagement. Staff encountering difficulties were encouraged to access the database to see how other areas of the college had resolved these issues. One college had installed daily screensavers with a 'thought for the day' (linked to learning and teaching) which appeared to staff when they logged on. The screensavers highlighted the impact of different teaching approaches on the learner.

Senior managers in one college had recognised that not all teaching staff were comfortable about engaging with a wider group of learners. They identified specific vocational areas where there was reluctance by staff to change practices and teaching styles and selected staff from these areas to undertake tailored professional development. There were good examples of staff changing their approach and practice as a result of their development activities.

One college had created coordinator posts within each curricular area to focus on the quality of learning and teaching. Each coordinator worked closely with their curriculum manager and used curriculum team meetings to keep staff informed of current issues and developments. The coordinators met with the quality manager on a monthly basis to report on emerging trends, areas requiring intervention and staff development needs.

### **6.3 Key messages**

- The focus within the SFC/HMIE Quality Framework on *learning and teaching* and *learner progress and outcomes* stimulated effective joint working between teaching and support staff.
- Ongoing staff development programmes on inclusive practices for all college staff have assisted colleges to develop appropriate FE provision and services to support learners.

## 7 Recommendations

Colleges should:

- ensure that the collaboration between teaching and support staff in the planning of programmes is consistently effective across all college departments;
- ensure that staff teams reflect on the whole learning experience to identify and resolve issues which create barriers to attendance retention and attainment;
- ensure that induction programmes are appropriate to learner needs in terms of content, timing, delivery styles and materials;
- further develop joint planning of provision with key partners to encourage and ease transition to full-time FE programmes; and
- ensure that key partners are sufficiently aware of the current college context and content of FE-level programmes to enable them to engage actively in development of local provision.

HMIE should:

- further explore and report on college arrangements for tracking learner progress in wider skills through measuring and recording of distance travelled.

SFC, working as appropriate with other bodies including SE, Learning Connections and COSLA, should:

- consider how best to improve access and transition to the FE curriculum from local authority and other community-based learning provision; and
- consider how best to improve arrangements in colleges to ensure adult literacy needs are met within full-time FE programmes.

The Scottish Executive should:

- consider implications of this report for approaches to resolve issues pertaining to young people not in education, training or employment (NEET).

Employer bodies, enterprise networks, local authorities and voluntary/ community agencies should:

- engage more intensively with colleges to inform the planning of curricular approaches and programme design.

## **ANNEX 1**

### **Colleges visited for the task**

Dundee College  
Elmwood College  
Cardonald College  
Reid Kerr College  
Lauder College  
Dumfries and Galloway College



## **ANNEX 2**

### **What did learners think about their college experience?**

As part of this task, members of the HMIE team met a group of learners in each of the six colleges to gain feedback on what they considered had been effective practice. Below is a summary of learner responses at these meetings. It is organised by the key questions that learners were asked.

#### ***What areas did you find most useful?***

All found work placements and learning about the world of work both interesting and helpful. They enjoyed applying the skills they had learned in college and linking theory with practice. They enjoyed feeling part of the world of work.

All commented on learning and applying new practical skills such as using a computer and developing these skills in preparation for work.

Most thought that setting targets and charting their own progress helped them manage learning better. It made them feel in control on an interesting journey.

#### ***What encouraged you to stay on programme?***

All learners were extremely positive about the guidance and support they received from staff.

All commented on positive and mutually respectful relationships with staff. They enjoyed being treated as an equal and staff listening to their views. Some commented that being treated with respect and being in an adult environment had improved their behaviour.

Some commented on peer support within the class group as being important.

Some commented on programmes having the right mix of activities such as practical, theory, personal development, core skills development and work experience.

#### ***What helped your performance on the programme?***

All learners cited development of core skills within practical activities as being key to helping their performance. Some described it as “learning without knowing you’re learning”. Some commented on the difference between doing maths at school and maths as part of a work-related activity and were very positive about the impact that college had on their ability to learn.

All said that they were well supported by staff and had good opportunities to ask and receive feedback.

Some commented that staff got in touch very quickly (using text messages) if they didn’t attend classes and this had helped to make sure they didn’t develop a pattern of erratic attendance.

#### ***What was the most important benefit?***

Younger learners commented on the positive impact college had on their maturity, behaviour, aspirations and learning.

Most stated they had grown in confidence, developed a sense of direction and felt more in control.

Most considered qualifications were useful and would help them to get work.

## ANNEX 3

### Bibliography and useful links

- Scottish Funding Council: Student and Staff PI's for FE Colleges in Scotland 2004-05  
[http://www.sfc.ac.uk/publications/FE\\_Staff\\_and\\_Student\\_PI's\\_2004-05.pdf](http://www.sfc.ac.uk/publications/FE_Staff_and_Student_PI's_2004-05.pdf)
- The Lifelong Learning Strategy for Scotland, Life Through Learning, Learning Through Life (Scottish Executive, February 2003)  
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2003/02/16308/17750>
- HMIE for SFEFC, Student Learning in Scottish Further Education Colleges  
<http://www.hmie.gov.uk/documents/publication/SLiFEC.pdf>
- Analysis of HMIE Reviews of Quality and Standards in Further Education (2004-05)  
<http://www.hmie.gov.uk/documents/publication/hmiearqsfe.html>
- <http://www.hmie.gov.uk/hmiegoodpractice/default.aspx>
- SFC/HMIE Quality Framework Document  
[http://www.hmie.gov.uk/about\\_us/inspections/documents/sfetc\\_framework.doc](http://www.hmie.gov.uk/about_us/inspections/documents/sfetc_framework.doc)
- Preparing Learners for Learning HMIE quality enhancement project for SFC
- Changing Lives: Adult Literacy and Numeracy in Scotland (HMIE 200)  
<http://www.hmie.gov.uk/documents/publication/clalns.pdf>
- Citizenship in Scotland Colleges (HMIE/SFC to be published 1 November 2006)